

Teddie Buhler 1910–2006

Teddie Buhler, a founding member and longtime secretary of the The International Palm Society, died December 12, 2006 after a very productive, honorable life.

She was born Theodora Breymeier on September 2, 1910, in East Orange, New Jersey. To understand how much the world changed over the next 96 years, it is helpful to put her birth date into context. In 1910, life expectancy for a female born in the U.S. was about 52 years. William Howard Taft was president of a country that had only 46 states, and no one had heard of The Great War. Marie Curie had not yet won the Nobel Prize, and x-rays would not be discovered for another year and a half. Teddie was already 19 months old when the *Titanic* hit an iceberg and sank, and she was almost four years old when the Panama Canal was opened. Also consider these facts: although the reform-rich Progressive Era was in full swing at the time of Teddie's birth, progress on some fronts was grudging. Only one-third of eligible children in the U.S. enrolled in elementary school, and not even 10% of them finished secondary school. Teddie was 10 years old before the constitutional amendment guaranteeing women the right to vote became federal law. (In fact, her languid adoptive state, Florida, did not get around to ratifying the 19th Amendment until 1969!)

Teddie was raised in Upper Montclair, New Jersey, but went to Neuchâtel, Switzerland to finish secondary school. Afterward, while working as a secretary in the U.S. Consulate in Zurich, she met Theodore "Ted" Buhler, an engineering student from Pennsylvania. They were married in New York City in 1935 but moved to Miami in December of that year to take over a boatyard later renamed Miami Shipbuilding Corp. In 1937 they built a home on San Marco Island, between Miami and Miami Beach, where they raised daughters Barbara and Jeannette. Teddie and Ted resided there until 1980.

Teddie had always liked plants, but the move to subtropical southern Florida presented opportunities on a grand scale. She became one of the early members of Fairchild Tropical Garden and spent a great deal of time volunteering there, particularly on a project to clarify the nomenclature of hoyas. Simultaneously she proceeded to fill her yard

with a large variety of exotic plants. Along the way, she also served as president of the Council of Garden Club Presidents, the Metropolitan Miami Flower Show and the Miami Orchid Circle. In her "spare" time, she served on various beautification committees in Miami and Miami Beach.

Teddie was keenly interested in how people could improve the beauty and safety of their lives, and she demonstrated a very forward-looking approach to community planning. In 1948, as postwar home construction in the U.S. boomed, the real estate editor of the *Miami Daily News* asked her to comment on studies conducted by the National Association of Home Builders to guide the development of new neighborhoods. He wrote, "Her view of the ideal community embraces all that touches or affects community life but she puts particular emphasis on recreational facilities for children, and flower and vegetable gardens." Teddie scolded older cities for poor planning, asserting that "if developers and home builders years ago had planned properly for children, they wouldn't now have to play in the streets."

The Metropolitan Miami Flower Show was long the dominant plant exhibition in southern Florida. During Teddie's presidency in 1950, Col. Robert Montgomery, benefactor of both Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden and the Montgomery Botanical Center, told *The Miami Herald's* Nixon Smiley that the show – in just its second year – was one of the best he had seen anywhere, including his longtime hometown, New York City. To carry out the theme "Paths Under the Florida Palms," the show set up an entire park inside an auditorium by moving in some 1,200 cubic yards of soil, more than 150 full-grown hardwood trees and palms, stone walks, grass, flowers, shrubs, and picnic tables. Smiley reported that the display was three times larger than that of the International Orchid Show recently held in the same location.

Yet for all those laudable activities, Teddie's crowning horticultural achievement didn't begin until she became a founding member of The Palm Society. For 30 years she served the organization as its corresponding secretary, bringing extraordinary energy and competence to the position. Meticulously, she maintained

information about each member on individual index cards, and her home became the repository of the Society's quarterly journal, *Principes* (later *Palms*). When members contacted her with questions about palms, her sense of duty, coupled with earnest scientific curiosity, impelled her to go to great lengths to find answers. Accordingly, she would call as many experts as possible to reach the consensus best response to those who had sought her advice. It is only slightly hyperbolic to suggest that if Bell hadn't invented the telephone, Teddie would have done it. It is not at all hyperbolic to say that for thousands of members over the years, she was the face and voice of The Palm Society. So pervasively was her name associated with the Society through various publications that for at least a decade after she moved to East Ridge Retirement Village in 1980, palm inquiries from around the world were still being mailed to her old address.

After 43 years on Biscayne Bay, Teddie did not miss her palm collection – but only because she transplanted most of it to East Ridge. Here was proof that you *can* take it with you! The village allowed her to create the Buhler Palmetum on a long rectangular roadside area about a block from her residence, and she steadily expanded the collection over the next two decades. Although she retired from the secretariat of the International Palm Society, she scarcely slowed down, serving many terms as a board member of the South Florida Palm Society. She also dived into committee work and classes at her new home, quickly becoming a familiar presence as she explored

its extensive grounds on a vintage three-wheeler. She continued to attend IPS Biennial and Midterm Meetings until well into the 1990s. Her last such trip was to Kew Gardens in 1997.

In 1995 the IPS recognized Teddie's immense contributions to the organization by conferring upon her honorary membership on its Board of Directors. In 2001, the SFPS undertook to have a rare cultivar of the Sealing Wax Palm named in her honor; *Cyrtostachys renda* 'Theodora Buhler' was formally introduced to IPS membership on the cover of the June 2002 issue of *Palms*.

If I might be allowed a personal observation, it would be about the traits that made Teddie a venerable figure. She and I spoke often over more than 25 years, but I never heard her boast of past achievements. Her interest was always in pushing ahead with current projects. In board meetings, she advocated her opinions enthusiastically but without stooping to antagonize or belittle those on the other side of the issue.

Many individuals leave their mark on the world like those who carve initials in a tree trunk: they diminish whatever they touch. But Teddie Buhler, in her long, full life, preferred to nourish the tree, and by that means left a mark more valuable and indelible on family, friends and nearly three generations of Palm Society members. We are grateful to her for that.

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